He Pulls No Punches With Sex
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EQUAL PARTS audacity, candor and humor are incorporated in the films of Curt McDowell, the Indiana-born film-maker who has made the Bay Area his home for the past 15 years.

Those elements are hallmarks of the craft which McDowell, 36, has employed in a host of short films and features shown all around the U.S. and in Europe. For the movie-going public in general, however, McDowell's films pose something of a problem, in that one of his primary focuses is on human sexuality: the do-it kind, not the talk-about-it kind. Although his first films were mostly humorous and light, his work has gravitated over the years toward an explicit-ness which some viewers find alarming.

McDowell, who started off at the San Francisco Art Institute on a painter's scholarship (and subsequently took an MFA in film), takes the view that art is a liberating influence. Like a painter, he uses the camera to reveal essences of the culture around him; but film is a medium that gives its subjects more immediacy
than does the painter's canvas - especial-ly when the filmmaker does away with Hollywood conventions of character, set-ting and simulated action.

In his Mission District flat last week, McDowell talked of his work, especially "Loads" (1980, 30 min., black-and-white), the first film he has released in five years. It will have its Bay Area premiere this Thursday at Cinematheque, screen-ing with older McDowell works, and will also be shown in the Roxie Cinema's two-day McDowell program on the 20th and 21st. The filmmaker admitted that his art goes for the genitals, if not the jugular, but also noted that it does so with the most constructive of intentions.

For McDowell, film offers a chance to investigate human desires (chiefly, his own) in a healthy way; his particular metaphor revolves, in the canon of 20th-Century psychoanalysis, around the enig-ma of his own sexuality and its base in that of his parents.

"In my movies," he said, "almost everybody has multiple roles - which is most interesting to me. If everybody (in the films) can play something of my mother and my father or Man and Woman then I can never go wrong." One critic characterized McDowell's approach to carnal doings as one of "Whitmanesque pansexuality." -

Proof of his right instincts, he said, comes from viewers. "My films usually put some people - general audiences on the spot; make them uncomfortable. But they come up to me one-by-one (sometimes as much as four years later) and tell me it changed their lives." Such an experience was common after the release of his 1971 "Confessions" (16 min., B/W), which won three awards (at Ann Arbor, Kent State and St. Xavier College) and has been widely screened.

"Confessions" began one night when a planned porno-shoot fell through. "The people (actors) didn't make it, so I shut myself up in my room, pointed the camera at the bed, put on this record my mom had made (a mail-order job from Nashville that she had recorded for $75; it was about my parents' courting: 'You Do the Rowing and I'll Do the Crowing'; very romantic, it made me cry). Then I looked at the camera and told my parents all the things I'd done since I was 13 that I never told them about." He later intercut his bedroom revelations with pictorially graphic interviews of friends, and other material, and finished it off with a sequence of him having sex with himself, to a soundtrack of applause.

"I was in *love* with a girl then - such a shock to me and even got engaged to her. I made the film for her. At the time, I was deciding which way I wanted to go (home or hetrosexual)." The choice, as shown in "Loads," is pro-male. The film is an anthology of homoerotic trysts with heterosexual men, most of whom could only be aroused before the camera with girlie magazines. "Loads" hits with the power of an elemental dream, as McDowell's intercut flashbacks, alternating moods and textures, and whispered, enigmatic voice-over narrative set the sequences off in an attack-and-retreat, meditative format.

"Loads" follows a similar form to that of his much-applauded "Nudes (A Sketchbook)" (1975, 30 min., B/W), both in its vignette structure and its intensity. ""Nudes' was a big turning-point for me," he said. "I used to make a whole group of films and show them together at Canyon.

I've always felt a bunch of short films could build up the audience. But I thought people would hate 'Nudes' 'cause I'd made so many humor films." It was the hit of the show, however, and "that revealed to me that I was on the right track, secretly, and publicly, on the wrong track. Since then, my films have been mostly dealing with that… Mostly with my parents' sexuality."

Although he recognizes his own bent as man-directed, McDowell allows himself and the world at large the freedom to
experiment. Indeed, in some ways he sees himself, personally and artistically, as a sexual ombudsman. "I think a lot of people could see the world through sexuality," he said, "but that's not my purpose ... Somehow the sexual part of my nature has always crept into my films no matter what ... I think there are alternate ways of doing things. The media consider the kind of sex I'm talking about – anything but the missionary position – is taboo. Right now, everyone is dealing (in the world at large) with terrorism and injustice; I'm trying to deal with the injustice of my sex life. I don't think of this desire as wrong or – immoral; sex deals with pleasure, and everyone always takes the pleasure out of it in dealing with it.

"All porno films have something going for them that I like - even the worst. But they miss the psychological aspect as to why this or that is a turn-on. I have no idea why those straight men (in "Loads") turn me on; I see that it's my own obsession - one of them.

"My real interest lies in things, like, I want to go on expeditions, and always document the sexual aspect of things.

Like National Geographic. What do those people (on National Geographic expeditions to out of the way cultures) do with their genitals? Just tuck 'em away and leave 'em there? What did the astronauts do?"

Of his concern with his parents' sexual identities, he said: "I ask myself, 'Why am I predominantly homosexual?' That's what I want to know. It's some-thing that has to come from somewhere, and I'm fascinated by it. It doesn't come from anything I was ever taught, or from my environment that I'm aware of but all this time, I've tried to narrow down my fantasies and other people's.

"Then I have other things (interests) which don't have anything to do with my own genitals. Women are an enigma to me. I don't understand what they want. Most homosexuals don't give a fuck what women are thinking; they like women for what they identify with them, but – I'm not political. My films are celebrations, but I'm not celebrating the gay lifestyle. I hate the gay lifestyle... But since so much of (current norms of) homosexuality is based on guilt and shame, I think you can realize that guilt is what's turning you on..."

Meanwhile, McDowell is working to complete the load of films which he has shot, but not finished editing, during his five-year retreat from the Big Screen. In terms of approach, he said, "I've decided I want to be able to deal with all different kinds besides (that of) sexuality."

And as for medium, he is just beginning to shoot video - a promitation which has grabbed his interest. "I feel like I'm in the same (relative) era Charlie Chaplin was in, back in Hollywood.... I think this is it - I feel like I'm on the ground floor: Visually, I've had ten years of experience, and I'm really just a frustrated rock-and-roller anyway. I make my films like records. I love the format of a record album."

About "Loads" and the potential audience, he added: "In a way I want to, well, not warn people, but - eventually people will know whether they want to see my films. There's no reason for me to try to change people who are, oh, 50, or whatever unless they want to. But I don't want to mislead people who want to see some light, funny films... -